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SUBJECT: POPULATION PROJECTIONS OFF THE CHARTS IN YEMEN

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Population projections in Yemen are among some of the highest in the world. According to the ROYG's National Population Council, the Yemeni population (approximately 23 million) will double within 23 years if current growth rates continue. With assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the ROYG's National Population Council and the Ministry of Public Health and Population create and implement government policy towards combating overpopulation. Since 2000, the ROYG has developed and implemented a National Reproductive Health Strategy to standardize its approach. While the ROYG's policy is mostly oriented towards Western reproductive health standards at the highest levels, the ROYG will continue to struggle to transfer the spirit of that policy to local governments and rural areas. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Population projections in Yemen are among some of the highest in the world. According to the ROYG's National Population Council, the Yemeni population (approximately 23 million) will double within 23 years if current growth rates continue. Officially, the population growth rate is 3.2 percent, while the fertility data is 6.2 children per woman in urban areas and 6.7 in rural areas. (Comment: Both the population growth and fertility rates are significantly outdated and thus subject to discrepancies and may be significantly higher. The population growth rate was last determined during the 2004 census, and the fertility rate is from 2003. End Comment.) High population growth rates have resulted in a so-called "youth bulge" with 50 percent of the population under the age of 15 and an additional 30 percent between 15 and 29. Yemen lacks education and employment prospects, and the young population is at risk for becoming a source of social instability.

¶3. (SBU) With encouragement from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the ROYG has recognized that the rising population increasingly places burdens on natural resources such as food and water and has implications for social stability. In 1993, the ROYG established the National Population Council to consider the problem of population expansion. The Ministry of Public Health and Population partners with international donors, such as the UNFPA, to implement the National Population Strategy, developed by the National Population Council.

ROYG'S POPULATION INSTITUTIONS

¶4. (U) The National Population Council has a mandate to conduct monitoring, create policy, coordinate with other bodies (such as the Ministries of Health and Education), and increase public awareness. Abdul-Malik Ali Sharafuddin, General Director of Planning and Resources in the Technical Population Secretariat of the National Population Council, told EconOff that the public awareness campaign is

particularly weak in rural areas where it is difficult to reach 133,000 villages. There are 16 coordination committees in the governorates to spread awareness of the importance of family planning outside of urban areas, although their actual reach is limited in scope.

15. (U) Collaboration is the name of the game when it comes to combating overpopulation in Yemen, according to Dr. Jamila Saleh Al-Raiby, Deputy Minister for Population at the Ministry of Public Health and Population. Dr. Raiby told EconOff that representatives from the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet have attended recent meetings on the family planning program at the Ministry. She said that things are "going well, but we can't work alone." The Ministry of Public Health and Population is advocating in the cabinet to mobilize additional resources within the ROYG and is attempting to gain support for family planning programming from other key line ministries such as the Ministries of Agriculture and Education.

THINKING STRATEGICALLY?

16. (SBU) Since 2000, the ROYG has developed and implemented a National Reproductive Health Strategy to standardize its approach to impending overpopulation. The goals of the strategy include standardizing regional stores of contraceptives, introducing a health information system, updating manuals for family planning, and responding to the high demand for contraceptives. With donor support, the Ministry of Public Health and Population has conducted outreach to students through a Health Education Center at the

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University, NGOs, journalists, health officials, and religious leaders. The ROYG is currently updating its plan of action for 2010. (Comment: While the importance of a national strategy for reproductive health is recognized within the government, challenges indigenous to Yemeni society still persist. When it comes to family size, Yemeni families, in general, have an attitude that "God (Allah) will take care of everything." Some also believe that any type of contraceptive action is a "shame on Islam." The lack of public awareness of reproductive health continues to remain a major obstacle to countering overpopulation, despite the fact that demand for contraceptives exceeds supply. End Comment.)

17. (U) Generally, Yemenis are reluctant to use and are unfamiliar with family planning as a way to reduce population growth. This is most acute in rural areas, which are also the areas least engaged by central government ministries and basic health practices education. The USG is providing support for population growth reduction by financing midwife training for family planning counseling, engaging religious leaders on how to discuss family planning, education about and distribution of contraceptives through local NGOs, and development of quality family planning data, particularly in rural areas.

INTERNATIONAL MOBILIZATION

18. (SBU) The UNFPA remains the major international mobilizer of resources that focus on population and development, gender, as well as reproductive health. Himyar Abdulmoghni, Assistant Representative of Population, Development, and Gender at UNFPA, told EconOff that his organization has prioritized the effect of rapid population growth (3.2 percent) on limited resources. They identified programs approaching family planning and reproductive health as potentially having a major impact on population growth, and have allocated USD 40 million for reproductive health. (Note: UNFPA is limited to problems that approach population and health, and cannot consider water scarcity and food security in their programming. End Note.) UNFPA believes

that family planning could reduce up to 25 percent of maternal mortality, which is currently one death for every 300 births. The UNFPA programs, in conjunction with the Ministry of Public Health and Population, have gained support at the highest levels of the ROYG. In 2007, President Saleh announced that family planning is a priority and the Prime Minister held a national population conference supported by USAID which brought together key ROYG officials handling population issues. Despite implicit executive support since 2007, UNFPA and other donors such as USAID have served as the major instigators, pressuring the ROYG to move forward on population, gender, and reproductive health issues.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) While the ROYG's policy is mostly oriented towards Western reproductive health standards at the highest levels, the ROYG will continue to struggle to transfer the spirit of that policy to local governments and rural populations. Public awareness remains the major challenge to successfully implementing the National Reproductive Health Strategy. Outreach to religious leaders and other opposition groups, who have direct contact with and influence over rural populations, may lead to sustainable thinking that has a generational effect. End Comment.
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